

"Adapting to Peace; Preparing for War; Responding to Crisis: An Unworkable Triad?"

The American experience of the triad: on using history to answer this question

Peter J. Schifferle, PhD

Professor of History

School of Advanced Military Studies

U.S. Army Command and General Staff College

2015 Army Historians Training Symposium

July 2015 draft from 28 JUN 2015

The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College or any other governmental agency.

Distribution is unlimited.

Fair use determination or copyright permission has been obtained for the inclusion of pictures, maps, graphics, and any other works incorporated into this manuscript. A work of the United States Government is not subject to copyright, however further publication or sale of copyrighted images is not permissible.

As the guns fell silent all along the German defensive positions in north-western Europe, officers on all sides of the Great War began to change their thinking from war-based tactical and operational activities to peacetime issues and concerns. How they turned ideas and concepts into budgets, war plans, troop structures and organizations, and the creation and education of an officers corps properly prepared for their roles in the next war, when – not if - that occurred is the overarching subject of this paper. How the American Army officers in the AEF discussed their duties, wrote numerous articles for service journals and civilian magazines, and eventually saw disappear nearly every expectation they had for the future of the land forces is a compelling narrative as effective today as a century ago.

Military historians can be very useful as advisors to both the civilian authorities and military leadership, but a few ground rules apply. It can be argued, and is a key point of his paper, that the critical role of historians is not only the creation of well written, insightful, and accurate works about the past, but also a more immediately important task of enabling the use of anticipatory history themselves, and the commanders and staffs where they serve, to discuss with accuracy and understanding the military history books and articles, and the protection and availability of the archival holdings of heritage material, weapons, and art, all of which look backwards to make the past as clearly chronicled and thoroughly explained as possible. It is hoped that the identification of useful discourse when historians go beyond “simply” recording the past and begin to assist the military with establishing priorities, dealing with foreign governments, democratic or autocratic, their bureaucracies, and simply coping with the emergent US administration’s divergent priorities, and resource allocations, that characterize peacetime militaries.¹ Any period of transition from war to peace and vice versa could serve as

¹ The goal of this short paper is to generate initial discourse amongst the professional historians in the pay of the American military. A point of departure for this discourse can be this Symposium, although I fear we are, once again, too late to really help transform our military from limited active combat to the different challenges one sees in a peacetime military.

evidence of success and failure, and sometimes both. My expertise is primarily the interwar period, and that is where we go next.

In 1919, every nation approached transition to a peace-time Army from their unique national perspectives. The French national response was to claim honor as the most sacrificed nation. They spent the interwar decades attempting to keep any crisis from generating another total war in Europe.² The Germans began to manufacture a political fable, the *Dolchstoß* – the myth that the Germans were never defeated but returned home with colors flying and individual weapons taken back with the withdrawing forces, partially an attempt to understand how they had lost when the German military remained, apparently, strong and undefeated.³ The British looked backward to the glory days of imperial policing, and dreaded, officially, any requirement for re-engaging on the continent, in any large force.⁴ The Americans, were late comers to the slaughter of the Western Front, but when committed to combat in the late summer of 1918 suffered horrendous casualties, some 27,000 killed in action and more than 100,000 wounded in action in the Meuse-Argonne campaign in the last seven weeks of the war. These horrendous casualties, and the widespread awareness that the incompetent American Army officer corps left much to be desired, generated an American military sentiment that the US armed forces would never be caught so unprepared, again.⁵

² Robert A. Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory: French Strategy and Operations in the Great War*. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005

³ A useful text is James S. Corum, *The Roots of Blitzkrieg*, University Press of Kansas, 1992. An insider's look, and certainly not to be fully trusted, is Heinz Guderian, *Achtung – Panzer*, trans by Christopher Duffy, London: Arms and Armour Press, 1937, 1992.

⁴ The threads of a discussion on the British failure to cope with the resource allocation and catch-up to the Luftwaffe is found in many sources, including Williamson Murray's groundbreaking, *The Change in the European Balance of Power, 1938-1939: The Path to Ruin*, Princeton University Press, 1984.

⁵ See the classic primary source –*American Armies and Battlefields in Europe*, Washington, D.C. US Government Printing Office, 1938, 1992. Also see Peter J. Schifferle, *America's School for War: Fort Leavenworth, Officer Education, and Victory in World War II*, University of Kansas Press, 2010.

Understanding the depth of commitment of military officers to their own national myths from the cauldron of the Great War is an essential part of the professional lessons learned from the 1918 to 1941 experience. Both perspectives need to be analyzed to answer the question of this symposium. Can an armed force simultaneously adapt to new conditions, frequently at the Kuhnian paradigm collapse moment necessary to generate a new paradigm in science, and by our expansion – to military forces as they react to the breakout of peace, generate an acceptable self-identity and a powerful cultural narrative. So enters the AEF and the American lessons from the Great War. Can we, today's professional military historians, adapt to peacetime, prepare for war, and respond to crises simultaneously.⁶ An unstated assumption is that at the start of every peace, the military of the United States reacts within its own narrative to try to do exactly this. However, the American military narrative is frequently restrained by budget and other resource constraints, very similar to that seen currently. There is very little to compare, however, within these two transitions. What can be learned from a sound assessment of the earlier transition is what questions are going to emerge from the maneuvering of all interested parties. Even knowing the rough likelihood of which questions seem to matter could markedly improve the preparation of the military leaders to give a useful answer.

The AEF, about 1.5 million strong on November 11th, and with an additional 1.5 million men yet to sail to France, willfully and deliberately created a military narrative focused on what American power would have shown, if only the Armistice had not occurred. A significant thing to remember -- different wars require different ending stories. The Great War ended as discussed – roughly half of the conscripted force was still in the Continental United States. World War II ended in Europe as the US committed its last divisions into the attack across the Rhine. The

⁶ Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, University of Chicago Press, 1962.

Pacific War would have ended with the invasion of the home islands, with likely US casualties well above a million killed and wounded. That it ended with the detonation of two atomic bombs, and the entrance of the Soviets into the war created a very different occupation duty demands than those in Europe. The Korea War ended (with a cease fire) with many American forces still in Europe defending American interests at the start of the Cold War. Vietnam ended as a defeat, although another narrative could have been constructed to identify the need to have sufficient “conventional” forces to defeat any aggressor, in the guise of the Cold War.⁷

The first narrative construction of the Twentieth Century for the American Army was the experiences in the great War. Although the Philippine Insurrection and the Punitive Expedition into Mexico all began and ended in this period, mere variations in scale make the post November 11, 1918 transition seem more applicable today. Asking the three questions from the AEF perspective is, or could have been, very useful in the transition. Unfortunately, it appears that learning what the likely questions will be, and developing professionally sound answers may already have occurred.⁸

Several critical assessment tools or techniques come to mind from the 1918 to roughly 1920 transition. It may be convenient to sort likely questions into three general topics. What will the next significant war look like? What will the forms of combat become? Finally, what type of military would be appropriate preparation for these future combat engagements? There are several challenges to doing this assessment professionally and soundly. One is the use of the word asymmetrical. Another challenge is actually knowing enough history to sort out the nature of the next war, and/or the form of the next emergent warfare systems. The issue of the type of

⁷ See, among many others, John Dower, *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II*, NY: Norton, 1999; T.R. Fehrenbach's *This Kind of War: A Study in Unpreparedness*, Macmillan, 1963, or in a reprint edition, U.S. Army Command and General Staff School, 1994; Lisle A. Rose, *1950: The Cold War Comes to Main Street*, University Press of Kansas, 1999.

⁸ For cultural issues in the American military, see Carl H. Builder's two books: *The Masks of War: American military Styles in Strategy and Analysis*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989 and *The Icarus Syndrome: The Role of Air Power Theory in the Evolution and Fate of the U.S. Air Force*, RAND, Transaction Publishers, London, 1994.

military needed now for tomorrow is very much a cultural issue, well beyond the powers of mere military leaders to even advise the senior civilians on this set of questions.⁹

Initial advice for the President is arguably the most important. Most Presidents will judge the appropriateness of his or her military forces and service senior leaders through a successful definition of the nature of war itself. A description of the next round of combat, and the forms of maneuver, fires, intelligence and other military skills necessary for success raises itself several questions. How far into the future can we gainfully employ our imaginations? How does our system of alliances affect waging modern international war?

For the second question, the military are arguably most entranced in providing multiple answers, whether accurate or not seems less important than getting the military description of the future combat “on the table.” Part of this can be an unusual push to be as combat capable as the forces of another nation. This was partially the problem with the AEF in France, and to a lesser extent fighting Iraqis or Afghans.¹⁰

However, we can generate and then attempt to use, a series of questions that should be asked. One of the most useful campaigns from the Great War, with utility for World War II and the future, the Meuse Argonne offensive generated hundreds of memoirs, diaries, after-action reports and all the rest of documentary evidence one would expect from twenty three divisions entering combat, nearly half for the first time. That the mixture was in part intentional, especially the use of green divisions versus the commitment of veteran divisions, with markedly greater casualties and markedly incompetent maneuver, fires, air integration and logistics transportation

⁹ One of the most disturbing recent trends, acknowledged by journalists and members of Congress, is the very small percentage of our civilian leaders who have spent any time in the military. From teaching military officers since 1997, I am still shocked when it becomes obvious the amount of history our students have never even thought about, much less read in a disciplined reading program, or engaged in a graduate school education.

¹⁰ One of the most comprehensive German sources to deny the existence, much less the value, of blitzkrieg is Karl-Heinz Frieser, *The Blitzkrieg Legend: The 1940 Campaign in the West*, Naval Institute Press, 1995, 2005. Also useful is John Mosier, *The Blitzkrieg Myth: How Hitler and the Allies Misread the Strategic Realities of World War II*, NY: Harper Collins, 2003.

performance. None of this resulted in a shared feeling—despite subsequent popular perceptions--that the AEF had done exceedingly well. Instead, most of the post-combat documentation depicted an Army, and its professional officers, woefully under-trained for modern combat. Of course, many of the ideas generated by the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF) were never tried, since nearly all of the AEF's effort was to prepare two or three mobile and motorized armies for the decisive "Big Push" in the spring of 1919.

As the Armistice of November 11, 1918 rapidly ended the fighting on the Western Front, U.S. Army senior leaders began to discuss the new officer corps that the United States needed. Based on the professional experiences of these senior officers in forming, deploying, employing and then redeploying and standing down nearly three million soldiers from April 1917 to the passage of the National Defense Act of June 1920 (NDA), their experiences in forming the A.E.F. professional military training and education system in France and subsequently back in the United States, and then the effect on the Army of the National Defense Act of June 1920. All of these transition points were dealt with rapidly, but with a decreasing likelihood that the Army would meet the future with one coherent vision.

What became law in the NDA of 1920 was only a small part of the minimum Army structure (soldiers, units, garrison facilities, officer education) senior officers believed was essential if the country was to escape the traps of the 1917-1918 experience. The construction of requirements for Congress immediately exceeded the pre-1917 expenditure, and was unacceptable to Congress. The military, especially the Army, pushed for Universal Military Training (UMT), including a selective service in peacetime component, and Regular Army units sufficient to handling the defense of the southern border and expeditionary requirements that

would exceed the capabilities of the US Marine Corps.¹¹ In a manner very similar to the relations from Congress to the Pentagon, forms of the DOTMLPF of the Army today. Congress appears to have had, in 1919 and 1920, less interest in the details of preparedness than they have had since 1949, although Congress was deeply concerned about getting trapped in another bloody overseas war.¹² Although Congress authorized a regular Army of some 250,000 soldiers, Congress routinely only allowed a budget that would support less than half of this number.

Many senior officers believed that the NDA of 1920 practically guaranteed a miserable starting performance by the Army in the next major war. Diplomats, politicians and the income tax collectors understood this, but also felt the long range security of the United States depended, in large part, and the strong economic foundation of the US in the 1920s. Congress and the President trumped all the controversial discourse and wrote and signed the Act with very little military expertise.¹³ However, the uniformed senior leaders had thought such restrictions were likely, (had anticipated the questions) and had planned for some substitute for field experience – the officer education system and the Corps Area Command system.

As senior politicians, bureaucrats, economists, senior military officers and journalists discuss the military needed for tomorrow, they are usually left with little to show for their work. They usually attempt to get the new tomorrow so well identified and integrated with the Federal budgetary process, that the smallest of discrepancies can seem to doom all of the analysis. This was certainly the case with the flawed but vital discussion in 1919 and early 1920 which eventually became the statute of The National Defense Act, which defined the tasks and

¹¹ Partially serendipity, and partially thoughtful and careful analysis, the NDA of 1920 provided planning and execution structure and staff officers for a set of likely Army occupation duties. Throughout this period of peace, the Army maintained at least one regular regiment in China, several regiments in the Philippines, a framework division in Panama, and two weak cavalry divisions on U.S. – Mexico border.

¹² **Need source for DOTMLPF in today's military.** Congress appears to have had, in 1919 and 1920, less interest in the details of preparedness than they have had since 1949.

¹³ **Need material cited from the NDA fight.** Suggest Smythe on Pershing—detailed discussion. Access research material on Langres, pre-1919 return, what did the soldiers and the officers do? Sort out argument over the NDA – big names on every side.

resourcing of American's armed forces from 1920 through Protective Mobilization, sometime in 1939 or 1940.¹⁴ The parallel with what has been identified as a "peacetime" recovery from combat in Iraq and Afghanistan and organize to create the next necessary force, or perhaps force effects, necessary to achieve the national policy objectives.

Another trap for the national leadership is the likelihood that the President and Secretary of Defense are likely to think they know enough about the military to be able to ask the right questions of the senior military leaders. If this occurs, part of the disagreement frequently seen between the Commander in Chief and his/her General Officers and Admirals (GOFOs), becomes more and more of an issue with the passage of time, and the drumbeat of casualties from the war zone. Today, with combat involving American forces raging from Afghanistan to Syria, the Congress appears very ready to do domestic politics, and the President, in his last term, appears more interested in domestic policy as well.¹⁵

From this very brief look back a century, it appears the American president will ask three sets of questions. First are questions of what is the nature of this new military engagement, what will it cost, how will we know if is over, or should be over, and what is the definition of success. The second set of questions asks his/her military commanders to identify the major tasks, requirements, likely costs and negative effects on other combatants, and some former allies. How will the battle function? What will be the images and videos taken by allied and opposition forces, and its effect on maintaining the moral high ground with the American people. The third set of questions asks how the military, and Congress through statute, decide if a professional force is sufficient for the anticipated combat. Will this war require selective

¹⁴ Lessons from the American experience of 1917-1918 were rife, both on the senior civilian side and the uniformed military. In the American system, it is a near certainty that Congress will open hearings into the "Conduct of the War" within weeks of the start of the war, if Congress and the President are from different political parties, or towards the end of the war – or an level of increasing exhaustion with the war, then the people vote, and act, but Congress and the President maneuver for political strength, and the morale of the people drops again.

¹⁵ See Bob Woodward, *Obama's Wars*, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2011.

service? Will it require extensive use of National Guard soldiers, and which state governors would use this as a political weapon.

However, the reality is worse.

Seeing a President who does not agree with the nature of American responses to adversary provocations recommended by the senior military officers, and having no effective response force, or counter weapon to keep American casualties from getting high and higher each passing month. Dealing with the daily questioning by the media, and the American citizens who have lost sons or daughters in combat, all of these painful experiences, take the President and most of Congress in a *wait-and-see* attitude. The *wait and see* is sometimes the only response he gets from his uniformed commanders, and even that might be a more restrictive response that the generals want to give, but are constrained by limits on operations imposed by a civilian authority somewhere along the line.

In this case, a case where the combat assumes a power by itself that decreases or eliminates the practical ability of the President to significantly control events of the battlefield. The senior military leaders understand this and give tasks to their subordinates to make the war into a “good war” through low-intensity, low-casualty, low-collateral damage operations.

Today, the US Army has many organizations to collect evidence, evidence generated only by slightly more than eight or ten divisions. The information retained and eventually shared, if the unit has an aggressive military history detachment with them, is both massive and exceptionally revealing of both victories and losses on the battlefields in Iraq and Afghanistan. [artifact: Frank Shirer at CMH has dozens of terabytes of unit reports in his storage area, and now way to BEGIN to exploit them. Just too large. However, in my opinion, we have lost many of the stories from US forces in Iraq and Afghanistan. We have also tended, sometimes in

accordance with direct orders or local policies, to not give fully informed discussions with the field historians. However, that discussion is for another paper.